

India

In Search of Snow Leopard



- Responsible Travel award winning tour with 8 days searching for the snow leopard
- Led by snow leopard experts who have worked alongside B.B.C. and Nat Geographic
- Stay in mountain villages and visit colourful winter festivals in remote monasteries
- Includes a donation to the Snow Leopard Conservancy - India Trust

SUMMARY

Our *Responsible Travel* award winning snow leopard tour is one of our flagship programmes, offering a few adventurous travelers a fascinating insight into Hemis National Park, Ladakh an area famous for snow leopard research, photography and filming. Steppes Discovery were one of the first UK operators to access the area, with a great success rate of sightings - the picture shown here was recently taken by one of our clients. Our tours are led by experts from the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, the wildlife charity which this trip supports and the team we use have worked closely with the BBC, National Geographic and the Discovery Channel on their groundbreaking filming of the cats.

Based in a comfortable, fully serviced campsite, this trip not only allows you the opportunity to track one of the world's most elusive animals, but to also explore one of India's most beautiful regions. Our tours are designed to visit the picturesque Buddhist villages and monasteries at a time when the communities are celebrating their winter festivals, with traditional costumes, music and masked dances. You will have the chance to meet the amazingly hardy mountain people in the region and will come to understand a little of the Buddhism they practice, by spending time in traditional home stays and experience firsthand the warmth and hospitality of the people who call this wilderness home.

Whilst the snow leopard is the main focus of the tour, the region has a surprising array of fauna for such a seemingly wild and desolate landscape. Blue sheep or bharal, the staple of snow leopard diet are found in large numbers, with ibex, wolves, wild yaks and even brown bears found in the remote valleys, whilst the brilliant blue skies are patrolled by golden eagle, bearded vultures and Himalayan Griffons who soar above the snow capped mountains.

Hemis National Park itself is located along the west bank of the mighty River Indus, with the park's main area covers 600 square kilometres at an altitude ranging from 3,300m to 6,400m. The area is difficult to access and Ladakh itself was not opened to foreign tourists until 1974, which means that as yet the infrastructure and accommodation facilities are not well established. However, therein lies its charm and for those prepared to take on the challenge of visiting this seeming cold and harsh climate will be rewarded with some of the world's most spectacular wilderness and be warmed by the welcome you will receive from your Ladakhi hosts.

YOUR EXPERTS

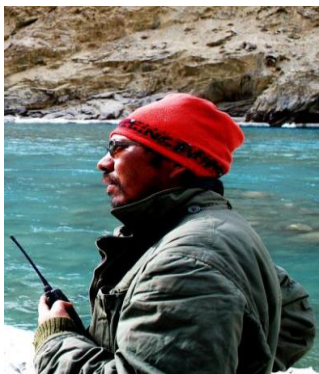
Our experts work at the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust with projects in local livestock herding communities and provide necessary input for developing the ongoing program. Their commitment to working for the welfare of both the wildlife and the rural people of Ladakh has grown out of their own Ladakhi village upbringing and from their experiences as a skilled mountaineers and guides.



Jigmet Dadul

Jigmet serves as SLC-India Program Manager and holds a Bachelor of Library Science degree, and has also worked as a nature trekking guide along with and has assisting several film crews with documentaries on Ladakh Buddhist sites and natural history.

He has also been involved in numerous wildlife documentaries in the region over the last 10 years.



Dorje Chitta

Dorje is considered to be among the very best naturalists in the region, with over 12 years of experience in guiding trekking, cultural and wildlife tours in Ladakh & Himachal Pradesh.

He has carried out coordination for wild life and cultural filming with a wide range of organizations including the National Geographic Society, the BBC and the Discovery Channel.

Tsewang Morup

Morup is trained mountain guide, with a long history of working with different wildlife projects in the Himalayan region. In the last eight years, apart from being a regular guide in the Markha Valley, Stok Kangri, Zanskar treks, he has also assisted with the BBC's 'Land of the Tiger' film, The New Zealand Natural History Unit's 'The Mountains', and 'Living on the Edge', ICON Film's 'India's Big Cats' and 'Spirit of the Snow Leopard' by Hugh Miles

Please note if Jigmet or Dorje are unavailable, one of their experienced researchers from the S.L.C.I.T will lead the tour.

QUICK REFERENCE ITINERARY

Day 1	Arrive Delhi / Fly to Leh / Omasila Guesthouse / Day at leisure
Day 2	Morning at leisure / afternoon Festival Visits / Sightseeing Tour / Leh
Day 3	Monastery Festival Visits / Leh
Day 4	Transfer to Hemis National Park / Snow Leopard Trekking / Camping
Day 5	Snow Leopard Trekking / Camping
Day 6	Snow Leopard Trekking / Camping
Day 7	Snow Leopard Trekking / Camping
Day 8	Snow Leopard Trekking / Camping
Day 9	Snow Leopard Trekking Homestay
Day 10	Snow Leopard Trekking Homestay
Day 11	Snow Leopard Trekking / Return to Leh / Overnight Omasila Guesthouse
Day 12	Fly to Delhi / Overnight Shanti Home
Day 13	At leisure in Delhi/ Overnight Shanti Home (Buffer Day)
Day 14	Depart

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conservation

DETAILED TRIP ITINERARY



Day 1 - Arrive Delhi / Leh

On arrival early in the morning (usually from the BA flight arriving at 01:25am) you will be met and transferred to a nearby airport hotel for a short briefing and the chance to freshen up. All documents and flight tickets will be handed over during this time and after a quick coffee, you then catch the early morning flight to Leh. The flight itself is spectacular, flying over the foothills of the Himalaya's, so try to get a window seat and make sure you have your camera ready as the view of Leh as you come in to land is incredible.



On arrival in Leh, you will be welcomed by your guide and transferred to the Omasila Hotel for the next 3 nights. This small, family run property is in the popular area of Changspa about a 10 minute walk from the centre of Leh, with spectacular views of the mountains from their large terraced garden, where they also grow much of their own food served in the excellent restaurant. After a briefing from your guide and some brunch, you spend the remainder of the day at leisure to begin acclimatisation, essential to your enjoyment of this trek. For those feeling energetic, the centre of Leh is only a short 10 minute walk away. Overnight Leh (B,L,D).



Day 2 - Leh

Spend the morning at leisure. In the afternoon you will take a sightseeing tour of Leh, the capital of the historic kingdom of Ladakh. You can also explore the rest of the town - a fascinating labyrinth of winding streets and quaint bazaars, lined with rows of shops and markets, where long lines of Ladakhi women in traditional dress and jewellery can be seen seated behind enormous baskets of vegetables. The spectacular 16th century, eight-floor Leh Palace looms above the town, dominating the landscape. This evening before dinner you will be given a short presentation on the work of the Snow Leopard Conservancy Trust, by members of the trust themselves, which can make for a lively discussion. They will then join you for dinner. Please note, that depending on circumstances, you may visit the SLCIT headquarters for the briefing earlier in the day. Overnight Leh (B,L,D).



Day 3 - Leh

Today you have the chance to experience the incredible celebrations in the nearby monasteries for the winter Festivals, celebrated on the 9th and 10th days of the first month of the Tibetan Lunar Calendar. The festivals are marked by the performance of "masked dances" by the monks of Stok and Thiksey monasteries, which you will get to visit, along with visits to monasteries at nearby Shey and Hemis. The festivals themselves are a time of huge celebration, with crowds hundreds strong, filling every available space overlooking the main courtyard in the monasteries, trying to get the best view from which to watch the dramatic dances and processions taking place throughout the day.





Families, friends, old and young come from miles around to enjoy the celebrations, complete with monks from the Red and Yellow hat sect in traditional dress, playing the Tibetan horn and other traditional instruments. Not only is this great fun, but also makes for some fantastic photographs, with the snow-capped mountains as a backdrop.



Shey monastery, about 10 miles from Leh, was once the residence of the royal family and is famous for its high gilded statue of Buddha along with a two-floor statue of the sitting Buddha. Shey was also the former summer palace of the kings of Ladakh and the gompa, still partially used, has recently been restored.

There is a small library and a collection of thankas (Tibetan silk paintings) and some stupas nearby. The 12m Shakyamuni Buddha statue made of copper but gold plated, is the largest in the region, built by King Singge Namgyal's son.



You then continue on to Thiksey, situated 12 miles from Leh and considered one of the finest examples of Ladakhi architecture, noted for its resemblance to the Potala Palace in Lhasa and the largest gompa in central Ladakh. There are several temples in this gompa containing images, stupas and exquisite wall paintings. It also houses a twenty-foot statue of Buddha, which has the main prayer hall around its shoulder. This monastery has an outstanding collection of art in its chambers along with an important collection of Tibetan books in its library.

You then move on to Hemis, is one of the richest, biggest and most famous gompas in Ladakh. Built during 1630s, it has numerous thankas, silver chortens (shrines) studded with precious and semi precious stones and various images of Buddha. The Hemis monastery belongs to the Drukpa order, containing an excellent library, well-preserved frescoes showing some Kashmiri influence and the ubiquitous Buddha figures. You then return to Leh for the night.



Overnight Leh (B,L,D).

Day 4 - Leh / Latho / Rumbak - Camping

This morning you begin your trek into Hemis National Park, driving to Latho, 6kms across a wooden bridge over the River Indus, considered the boundary between town and the wilderness and is therefore draped with prayer flags of all shapes and sizes. After driving along the winding roads that hug the mountains, you arrive at Spituk, where you leave the vehicles and commence the trek along the trail that zig-zags along the river for around an hour, through deep gorges. On arrival at the camp, which will already have been set up, you will be given hot drinks and biscuits, before lunch is served.



The camp consists of individual Marmot dome tents, each with small mattresses provided and two larger, Meru style A frame mess tents, one acting as a kitchen where the cooking is done and the other has a small table where meals are served - these are also heated as it can get very cold at night.



The afternoon is then spent on a short walk to familiarise yourself with the area, keeping an eye out for evidence of snow leopards, before returning to camp late afternoon, for more hot drinks and biscuits.

In the evening you are served a delicious (and warming!) 3 course meal and whilst you should not expect a huge variety of food, all dietary requirements can be catered for and many clients comment on how good the food is, particularly considering where you are. Your guide will then discuss the day's events and run through the programme with you for the following day, answering any questions you have. This briefing will take place each evening.



Most people retire to bed soon after dinner, given the early starts, but it is recommended that you bring a good book, cards or other games to entertain yourselves in the evening.

Day 5 - 10 - Camping & Home stays

For the next 7 days, you will trek into the surrounding valleys to search for the snow leopard - a few hours first to acclimatise, before stopping to set up the viewing scopes to scan the horizons. There will be periods spent stationary looking for wildlife so it is important you have warm clothes, but lunch and hot drinks are provided.



The movement of the group each day will depend very much on the movement of the wildlife and you may find yourself climbing short ridges, scrambling up ridges or crossing frozen streams. You will also keep a look out for your first blue sheep, which are the main source of prey for the elusive cats. Our guides will have spotting scopes, but it is also essential that you bring your own binoculars - and spotting scopes if you have them - as the more people looking, the better the chance of sightings.

It is important to look for fresh signs of snow leopard along the trail usually at junctions where two side valleys meet - a good place for sighting snow leopards, but always with tantalising views of the snow capped peaks in the distance. Most sightings take place early in the morning or late in the evening, so you should expect early starts at sunrise and after a quick breakfast and wash, you head out into the valleys.



You can expect to explore the numerous narrow gorges in the area, which open out into wide valleys, offering spectacular mountain views in the distance, following frozen streams and waterfalls in the shade of poplar trees, along trails and valleys empty except for the occasional pack horse, taking supplies to the remote villages, or monks returning from prayer.



Depending on snow leopard sightings, there is also an optional stay at a local home, where you are welcomed overnight in family run homestay in the tiny village of Rumbak, nestled deep in the mountain valleys.



This offers a wonderful chance for you to spend time with the families who live in the region and understand a little of their culture and the challenges they face in today's modern India. After a tour of the village, visiting the prayer wheel and local monastery, with plenty of stops for yak butter-tea and homemade biscuits (and the occasional shot of rum) you settle into the small kitchen and living area as dinner is prepared. This is usually a hearty vegetarian broth with fresh flat breads cooked on the open fire, which you will be sitting around to warm yourselves as night falls outside.



Your guide is very much there to act as an interpreter as your hosts will be as interested in you as you are in them and after an evening with the family, you retire to your private room - usually the largest and most comfortable in the home, specially reserved for guests. A clean mattress, bedding and thick blankets are provided, with hot water and tea provided in the morning. This is also a nice alternative from the camping, but make sure you listen out for wolves that are found in the valley below...

Day 11 - Return to Leh

This morning we walk back-up along the valley floors, retracing your steps to meet with the vehicles, scanning the snow line all the while for movement, before being driven back to Leh. This evening you enjoy a farewell meal with the team to toast your time in this beautiful part of the world. Overnight in Hotel Omasila (B,L,D)



Day 12 - Leh / Delhi

This morning you say goodbye to your trekking team and are transferred to the airstrip for your flight back to Delhi. On arrival in Delhi, you will be met and transferred to the Shanti Home hotel for the remainder of the day. Overnight Delhi, (B,L,D)



Day 13 - Delhi

This is an essential buffer day to allow for unexpected delays encountered in flying out from Leh. Should this day be free and the group arrived in Delhi last night, you can enjoy a day sightseeing in Delhi.

Given our tours run out of season due to the increased chance of sightings, it does mean that we are visiting during times of potentially severe weather which can disrupt flight schedules. Experience has shown time and again, that this buffer day is essential. There is the chance to explore Delhi today time permitting. Overnight Delhi, (B,L,D)



Day 14 - Day at leisure / Depart

A day at leisure in Delhi today with the use of a day room, before being transferred to the airport for your flight home.



Pre & Post Trip Extensions

- Experience the monumental beauty and atmosphere of the Taj Mahal.
- Look for tigers in Ranthambhore, Bandhavgarh or Kanha National Parks
- Barter for printed cotton and silks in the pink city of Jaipur
- Enjoy dinner at the Lake Palace in Udaipur - one of India's most romantic cities.
- Relax on a palm-fringed beaches or houseboat in the lush backwaters of Kerala.
- Visit the tea plantations of Darjeeling in North East India
- Sleep under the stars in a luxury tented camp in the Thar Desert in Rajasthan.

These are only a suggestion, given the size and diversity of India there are a whole range of extensions to suit every taste! Please contact us to discuss your options.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Dates:

2012
30th October - 12th November

2013
17th February to 02nd March

Total cost:

From £2,395 per person based on twin accommodation excluding international flights

Please note that the itinerary is based on a minimum of 6 paying clients up to a maximum of 8. Previously we have obtained this group size, but in the unlikely event that there are less than the minimum numbers, we will review the situation 12 weeks prior to travel and discuss your options.

With this in mind, it is important that you do not pay for any supplementary details relating to this trip, such as flights, visas or vaccinations until we confirm the trip is definitely running. Any financial commitments made by you prior to the 12 week review will not be refunded should the trip be cancelled due to insufficient numbers.

Includes:

Domestic flights within India, accommodation in a twin room / tent with meals and drinking water as shown, transport and transfers by private vehicles, entrance to national parks, activities and all trekking excursions with your expert naturalist guides and wildlife experts, English speaking tour leaders, local guides, porters and a contribution to the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust

Excludes:

International Flights to Delhi, travel insurance, visas, vaccinations, meals in Delhi, gratuities and items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement:

If you are happy to share accommodation with a fellow traveller of the same sex then you will NOT be charged a single supplement for your holiday. This is of course dependent on there being another same sex traveller on the trip who is also willing to share. If we cannot find you a suitable room-mate, then we will pass on the single supplement, imposed by the properties we are using. We will endeavour to keep this supplement to a minimum and will discuss your room options 12 weeks prior to the date of departure. Should you however wish to guarantee a single room then the additional cost is £475

TRIP NOTES

Travelling in this region

Due to the nature of these tours and the area visited, from time to time we experience unforeseen schedule changes, imposed by airlines and ground agents which can adversely affect or interrupt your itinerary at any stage of the booking. Whilst we are unable to cover the cost of any additional expenses that maybe incurred as a result of these changes, we will of course make every effort to assist you in resolving these matters as quickly as we can and to ensure the trip runs as smoothly possible.

Given our tours run out of season due to the increased chance of sightings, it does mean that we are visiting during times of potentially severe weather which can disrupt flight schedules. Experience has shown time and again, that this buffer day in Delhi at the end is essential. ***We must stress that seeing a snow leopard is NOT in any way guaranteed.*** In fact it must be regarded as a great privilege to even catch a glimpse of one, such is the elusiveness of these creatures. They are wild and by necessity elusive creatures with no fixed routine and finding them requires not only the skill and patience of the trackers/guides but also considerable luck!

Weather

Our trips are specially planned to optimise your chances of seeing snow leopards, namely when they are lower down in the valleys following the domestic flocks and prey. At this time of year, most passes may still be snow bound, the nights are very cold and even during the day the temperature drops when out of the sun, so high quality winter clothing and footwear is essential at this time. Ladakh is one of the driest regions in the Indian Himalaya but also one of the highest, with elevations rarely below 3000m and often above 4,000m. Given this and the northerly inland location means that the temperature is extremely cold. The first snows tend to fall around mid-October with the first of the heavy winter snows in December. Climate wise the daytime temperatures are rarely above freezing, although the days are usually sunny and incredibly clear with fantastic views across the valleys.

Vaccinations and Visas

All British nationals require a visa for entry into India. Normal tourist visas are valid for six months. The visa costs £30 (plus admin fees) direct from VFS Global <http://in.vfsglobal.co.uk/> and processing can take up to 3 weeks. Malaria is prevalent in India and we also recommend that you be inoculated against Hepatitis A, typhoid and tetanus. Please seek expert advice from MASTA on 09068 224100 or consult your doctor. Please note entry requirements are subject to change and whilst we are happy to help with visa's at all times, obtaining them remains your responsibility, so please ensure you read the up-to-date information on the above website.

Health and Fitness

Participants need to be in good physical condition and accustomed to walking. Some experience of cold weather trekking and camping at high altitude is useful as this will give you some idea of the conditions that will prevail. Doctors advice for all ages is a must so we recommend that you consult your GP regarding travel to high altitude areas before travelling.

Essential Items

Please note that once confirmed we will send you a trip dossier containing a clothing and equipment list and general information.

SUPPORTING CONSERVATION



Since its inception in 2000 (formally registered in 2003), the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT) has been dedicated to promoting innovative community-based stewardship of the endangered snow leopard, its prey and habitat to the benefit of the local people and the environment in the trans-Himalayan regions of Ladakh.

This tour includes a donation to the trust allowing them to continue their vital work.

WANT TO DISCUSS THIS TRIP

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Having recently returned from Ladakh with our group, Chris was lucky enough to not only visit the region during the winter festivals in the monastery's, but was privileged to be with our clients when they saw TWO separate snow leopards. Having spent time exploring Ladakh and much further afield in India, including visiting the palaces and forts of Rajasthan and tracking tigers in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, he will be happy to discuss the trip and any suitable extensions.